

# Grass Roots Conservation

UNITED STATES FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

## A Partnership for People and Wildlife

A FREQUENT MEASURE of success for any conservation program is how much land, water and air is protected. And so it is interesting that the fundamental measure of success of the Grass Roots Conservation Program in Montana's Blackfoot River watershed is instead the size and diversity of the partnership that it has brought together to conserve fish and wildlife resources.

In the Blackfoot River watershed, this locally-driven, consensus-derived approach has helped unite 660 different partners, including private landowners, conservation organizations, local, state and federal agencies, timber companies and private foundations. This program has coalesced around the basic premise that cooperation results in more effective conservation. While seemingly simple and logical, such a premise was in short supply in the western United States in the late 1980s and early 1990s: The so-called "sage brush rebellion" was underway, pitting private landowners and property rights activists against government regulators and conservation organizations.

Essential to the program, say its principal proponents, was sitting down and trying to find common ground. "For those of us who make a living off the land, it was realizing that we have to work with the government in order to have win-win solutions for the land and the people," says Jim Stone, a rancher and chairman of Blackfoot Challenge, a landowner-led watershed conservation group.

Greg Neudecker of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's private lands program, known as Partners for Fish and Wildlife, sees the big breakthrough as Stone's invitation to Neudecker to sit down and start talking. "Back in the early 1990s, we clearly were not on the same page," says Neudecker. He accepted Stone's invitation, and the two



began discussing "how we meet our responsibility to both wildlife and the community."

Since the early 1990s, the program has worked on a host of initiatives. To date the program has helped 65 landowners move 90,000 acres of private land into conservation easements; developed stream flow protection plans that involve "shared sacrifice" in times of drought; undertaken 500 projects with 147 landowners involving the restoration of 38 miles of streams, 62 miles of river and stream banks, 2,600 acres of wetlands, and 2,300 acres of grassland.

But Stone's ultimate reason for participating is a bit more personal: "I have a six-year-old son, and this is about sustainability."

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